

UNDERAGE DRINKING FACTS FOR PARENTS

Alcohol, especially in the form of beer, is the most abused substance among adolescents. Though legal for use by adults, the purchase and possession of alcohol by minors (persons under the age of 21) is illegal in all of the states.

That has not stopped more than half of Missouri's high-school seniors from admitting, when surveyed recently, that they have had an alcoholic beverage. According to the 2002 Missouri Student Survey, 30 percent of the 12th-grade students surveyed had engaged in binge drinking (consuming five or more drinks during one drinking occasion) during the 30 days prior to the survey. The problem of underage drinking in Missouri often does not begin in high school. By 8th grade, about 49 percent of the students have tried alcohol. That percentage increased to 78 percent for 12th-grade students. The survey also found that 29 percent of the students surveyed reported having a drink during the month prior to the survey, and 16 percent of all students reported binge drinking.

In the Monitoring the Future Survey for 2003, 28 percent of 12th graders nationwide reported binge drinking at least once during the two weeks prior to the survey. And nationwide 77 percent of 12th graders have had an alcoholic beverage in their lifetimes and 31 percent of those 12th graders had been drunk in the 30 days prior to the survey.

▼ Why Do Youth Drink?

Parents, peers, and the media all contribute to a youth's decision to drink. Another major factor is a lack of knowledge of the damage that alcohol can cause. Without the proper education and support from friends and family, youth fall into the trap of thinking that alcohol is okay and the norm. Most youth do not realize that their peers are alcohol free. Advertisements on television, on billboards, and in magazines also play a role in underage drinking, because youth see drinking as a positive activity, something that will make them part of the "majority."

▼ The Role of Adults

It is not surprising that Missouri school children tell researchers that their attitudes toward drinking are shaped more by what they see at home than from what they hear and see among their peers. A majority of them said their first experience with alcohol was at home in the presence of their parents. According to the 2002 Missouri Student Survey, students with the risk factor of "parents with attitudes favorable towards drug use" are nine times more likely to use alcohol. Drinking is seen as an adult activity by adolescents and drinking is a way to appear older, more mature, or "cool" among friends. Peer pressure plays a big role. But adults play a bigger role, for somewhere along the way, an adult has to make it possible for an adolescent or teenager to obtain what they cannot obtain legally on their own — whether it is an unscrupulous merchant who sells it, the adult friend who shows off by buying it, or the uncaring or unthinking parent who provides it.

▼ Tragic Results

The consequences of underage drinking are often tragic. Alcohol often plays a role in the three leading causes of death among teenagers and young adults: motor vehicle crashes, homicides, and suicides. If the underage drinker escapes immediate death or harm, there are long-range effects to worry about. Studies show the younger a person starts to drink, the more likely the person is to become dependent on alcohol. Especially worrisome to prevention and treatment professionals is the tendency of underage drinkers to drink to excess each time they drink, leading to passing out and blackouts (inability to recall or remember personal actions while intoxicated). Adolescents who drink are at special risk because their bodies are still developing. Excessive drinking can arrest or delay development of a young person's sexual organs and characteristics.

▼ What to Do?

What can parents do? Talk to your children, consider the example that you set for them, consider the factors that put your child at risk, know the facts about alcohol and the damage it can have on the growth and development of your children, know your expectations, explain why you are discussing alcohol with them, be clear about the rules and consequences, and keep the conversation about alcohol ongoing. They want and need your attention.

Community 2000 teams and coalitions in many towns and cities have enlisted the help of parents to pledge not to make alcohol available to each other's children, while other groups have solicited similar pledges from local merchants not to sell to minors. Still other groups have lobbied to have laws against underage drinking strengthened and enforced.

▼ Further Reading

For additional information on this and other related topics, visit the websites of the National Institute on Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse (www.niaaa.nih.gov), the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information, NCADI, (www.health.org), Missouri Prevention, (www.missouriprevention.org), Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free (www.alcoholfreechildren.org) and visit (www.family.samhsa.gov) for "A Family Guide to Keeping Youth Mentally Healthy and Drug Free."



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Sources: Status Report on Missouri's Alcohol and Drug Abuse Problems, January 1998; Missouri Youth Risk Behavior Survey, February, 1998; Missouri 2002 Student Survey; Monitoring the Future Survey, 2003; and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.